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Memory and History in Krishna Sobti's *A Gujrat Here, A Gujrat There*

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14605448

Article History: Submitted-07/11/2024, Revised-17/12/2024, Accepted-23/12/2024, Published-31/12/2024.

Abstract:

The present paper seeks to explore Krishna Sobti's autobiographical novel *A Gujrat Here, A Gujrat There,* first published in Hindi in 2018 and translated by Daisy Rockwell into English in 2019, to trace how Sobti's narrative refashions the self anew after experiencing the uprooting of Partition, and how the discourse of memory and utopia are reframed in the work to fashion a recuperative, critically nostalgic mode which challenges and problematises the ideas of belonging and citizenship. The paper shall use critical nostalgia studies and memory studies to show how Sobti performs as an autonomous subject in the face of the anxiety and trauma of the Partition, to create a post-memory archive that challenges and counters hegemonic dominant narratives or received histories of the event.

Keywords: nostalgia, memory, history, Partition, self.

The Partition of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947 was not only an originary moment for both nations but also a site of trauma and anxiety for the peoples who were uprooted from their homes and locales and forced to migrate in keeping with the new cartographies of nationhood which were remapped in the wake of political independence of the two countries.

Accounts of the Partition abound in the literature of India and Pakistan across genres such as poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. However, comparatively fewer accounts of the experience of the Partition exist in the form of literary memoirs or autofiction written by women who experienced the Partition firsthand. This may be due to the violence and generational trauma that marks the experience of Partition, especially for women, due to which memories of the event were suppressed, erased, and pushed into a kind of negative space to escape the abrupt trauma of an uprooting that could not be imagined or narrated.

This paper seeks to explore the postmemory of Partition as represented in Krishna Sobti's Hindi autobiographical novel *Gujrat Pakistan Se Gujrat Hindustan Tak* (2018), translated into English by Daisy Rockwell as *A Gujrat Here, a Gujrat There* (2019). While the novel's backdrop is India in 1948, just after the Partition, it is interesting to note that Sobti writes about the experience and published her text only in 2018. As Sobti asks:

Most novels about the Partition are autobiographical, drawing on personal memories. This raises an interesting question. What kind of language and tone does one use so that what is written is not merely a record of horror but an attempt to understand something of ourselves? (Bhalla 55)

In terms of genre, though the novel draws on autobiographical experience, the narrator refers to herself in the third person throughout, naming herself variously as Krishna, Madam, Bai Ji, and Miss Sobti. It is as if the experience of sudden, abrupt unmooring, the sense of loss can only be narrated even after seventy-odd years if only an objective distance can be maintained between the writing self and the self being written about. Sobti's resistance to framing the text as a memoir and her choice as a writer to distance her present self from the protagonist provides her with a strategy and a poetics to deal with the pain and anxiety of the trauma, to fashion a text which positions the protagonist as a resilient survivor. The text projects the life it represents away from the past and into the future; while acknowledging the hold the past still has in the making of the self.

The novel begins in Delhi, just after the Partition when the young girl Krishna has left her college in Lahore to come back to Delhi in the wake of the events of 1947. The Delhi she has known changes in front of her very eyes as friends and neighbours pack up to leave for Lahore, never to come back, mirroring her journey from Lahore to Delhi. As she roams the deserted streets, the emotional landscape of her life seems to be erased in front of her very eyes; known locales, neighbourhoods, and street corners are stripped of the familiar presence of friends and family: "Decisions have been made. /Distances have increased. /What was here is now there. /What was there is here." (Sobti 18) In tense lyrical prose that thrums with terror, uncertainty, and disbelief, Sobti asserts, "Now we are sharpened knives…we are weapons." (Sobti 21)

The narrative abruptly shifts to a train journey. Sobti does not fashion a continuous linked narrative, but one that is fragmented, sparse, and broken, mirroring her psychological state. The reader has to struggle to make sense of the narrative, much as the protagonist struggles to come to terms with this new reality. Young Krishna has left Delhi to arrive at the princely state

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

of Sirohi, located in the Indian state of Gujrat, leaving the Gujrat district of Punjab, now a province in Pakistan. While she has come to work here as a schoolmistress, she is overwhelmed with uncertainty, anxiety, and doubt. As she cannot even be sure of where she belongs, her homeland Gujrat, or Lahore, or Delhi, she makes an effort to come to terms with this new state by suppressing her trauma: "Gloominess doesn't fix anything…Whatever happened, happened." (Sobti 24) Even as the past haunts her, she shakes it off: "There's nothing for us there now. We are beyond that geography, that history, now. Shake off those sights, those memories. Throw them away." (Sobti 27) As memories rise unbidden, the emotional trauma of being othered from a place that is a part of her very sense of self necessitates a search for a new sense of self. While the past recedes as a dream, never to be retrieved, forever made foreign, the present is a nightmare of alienation, doubt, and dismay. As her conscious rational self strives to look only towards the future, her subconscious refuses to let go of a past that is still a part of her mental map. Sobti does not have the luxury of mourning, as the psychological violence of the Partition is normalised all around her. A Hindu refugee from Pakistan, her mourning does not fit the normative jingoism of the newly founded nation-states: her past and her history have been irretrievably lost, as she instinctively realises 'home' and 'country' have become unnameable for her in the politicised present. Markers of identity like culture, dress, and food must be changed to suit this new identity. Her aunt asks, "Why do you always wear Muslim clothes? Ghararas and kameezes…. why ever should we wear their clothes after Partition?" (Sobti 101) To overtly mourn the past is not permissible in the new logic of the nation-state. She does not fit into the foundational grand narratives of either India or Pakistan, hence her history is better forgotten, erased to write a fresh story, although its presence haunts her text as a palimpsest. A case in point is the idyllic description of her birthday picnic in Lahore on the banks of the Ravi as a college girl: "Colourful dupattas and fresh river breezes…" (Sobti 88). Even amid young merriment, Sobti wonders if she will "ever return there for (her) birthday again." (Sobti 91) This idyllic interlude and memory functions as a heterotopia in the novel: a moment in time and space that is nonlinear and other. This moment bridges the gap between the hazardous present and the subliminal desire for an impossible past. A moment of affect, it creates a narrative eddy that the rest of Sobti's text always already looks back to, and yearns towards. The event serves as a core memory for Sobti, a memory that can be relived only imaginatively since it is impossible to go back in time and history to the place and the people with whom it is associated.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

Foucault presents the idea of heterotopias in his writings as "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 22) A heterotopia is an imagined space, even though it may have a factual geographical location. The banks of the Ravi in Sobti's text functions as a heterotopia: a moment in memory that is real, since the narrator can relive the immediacy of the experience; but also absolutely unreal, since it is impossible to return to this past except through the imagination.

As crippling nostalgia for that which cannot be returned to grips her, her pragmatic self busies itself in fitting in in this new regime. The feudal paraphernalia of the princely states is also soon to be an anachronism in independent India. As her self-respect rebels at being named a refugee, she struggles to see her condition objectively: "It's neither negative nor positive. Just a circumstance. Of being ripped up by one's roots. Of being replanted elsewhere." (Sobti 37)

An educated female refugee from Pakistan who has come to claim employment, Krishna is subjected to what Daisy Rockwell has termed a "series of microaggressions". (Sobti 1) She is constantly reminded of her status as a refugee, and slyly insulted for wishing to be a working woman. In the feudal patriarchal structure which Sobti inhabits, a woman working represents a lack of honour in her men folk, a family impoverishment that has forced the woman to come out of her hearth and home for economic sustenance. As she navigates the intricate political machinations in Sirohi as governess to Prince Tej Singh, the future of feudal states looks bleak. Coming back to Delhi, she decides to quit her job at Sirohi and look for a job in Delhi. As she inscribes a new self, to go hand in hand with the new nation, she applies for a new job in the Army Officers' Children's school in Delhi; as she goes for the interview, "a new feeling of faith is awakened in her…Our Forces! Our Pride!" (Sobti195)

The novelistic memoir thus may be read as a feminist bildungsroman; a narrative of refashioning the self anew in keeping with the construction of a new nation. Daisy Rockwell has hailed it as a "feminist anthem" (Sobti Introduction), focussing on the resilience of spirited survival and a refusal of abject victimhood. Sukrita Paul Kumar identifies Sobti's oeuvre as a counter archive that dismantles conventional narrativization, offsetting the dominant narrative with a dynamic one that points to a different sense of the past. This alternative perspective historicises the past differently. (Kumar and Sethi 37) The counter-archival text does not merely serve as a record of the past but also points to possible futures that may be enabled by this new vision and dialectic. Sobti's autobiographical text, while serving as a witness to the unspeakable

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trauma of loss of home and belonging, also serves to show how such loss may be overcome to rebuild anew. A fiercely pragmatic and emphatically positive writer, Sobti is as interested in rebuilding a new self despite the trauma, as in recalling its indelible imprint on her personality. This act of remembering becomes a process of re-membering, healing, and putting together the fragmented bruised self to recover the dignity of human living. (Kumar 37) As Anjali Roy argues, those who experienced the Partition firsthand chose to rescript their stories in terms of fortitude, resilience, and survival, postponing and deferring the memory work of mourning. (Roy,180) Sobti too, in her autofiction, chooses to repeatedly suppress her anxieties, and wilfully 'forget' the past, as that seems to be the only way to forge forward in the new present. As the country steps into modernity with its independence, the new woman represented by Sobti aspires to occupy a space, and have a stake in this new modernity, as a citizen of this new India. This then requires a systematic eschewing of not only her memories of a past in what has now become a 'foreign' land but also a separation from the feudal pasts that Sirohi seems to cling to. Sobti's decision to leave her job as the governess of the prince of Sirohi, and to come back to Delhi to work in an army school as a teacher is thus stepping into postcolonial modernity, and the task of being a modern citizen of an independent state, at the cost of a syncretic geospatial identity which Sobti had hitherto embraced. Sobti's text is thus fractured across these filial, fraternal, and geographical faultlines: while her status as a refugee and her affiliation to a cultural plurality is threatened, she shapes a new self as a woman, etching a new identity within a reinscribed cartography which is not merely geographical but also psychological. To emerge as the sanitised, ideal citizen of the new nation-state, violent erasure of the uncomfortable, delegitimised past is a prerequisite. What emerges in the memoir text is thus a sense of a nuanced self; one which cannot be tidily categorised in monolithic terms. It is the impossibility of systemic categorisation and resistance to such hegemonic attempts which definitively marks Sobti's post-memory of the partition.

As she is slighted for being a refugee woman who dares to earn her living, a Hindu who is 'disloyal' to her religio-cultural identity by favouring 'Muslim' attire, a thinker who refuses to categorise people by their caste, Sobti espouses in her text a kind of cosmopolitan counter modernity, in resistance to and over the modernity of nation and state. As Partha Chatterjee asserts, to be modern is to question, reframe, and reshape available modernities, to "identify the forms of our particular modernity." (Chatterjee 9) Sobti's memory novel seeks to offer a new vision of modernity, which runs counter to the received sanctioned modernity of the post-partition nation-state. In keeping with this syncretic idea of an Indian identity that resists a

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simplistic mapping into national histories, she had asked for the title of her cover for her text to resemble Persian calligraphy, though it is in the Devnagri script. (Maheshwari 232) This signals her intention to present her work as a product of the heterogenous culture of the subcontinent before partition, as she represents through the narrative praxis the plurality of the subcontinental culture which is her legacy.

Sobti's text embodies a resistance to the setting up of conservative national hegemonies, which accompanied the formation of the nation-states of India and Pakistan after the Partition. Ironically, to be a citizen of the new India, all affiliations with Sobti's othered legacy need to be erased. The new citizen of the nation can come into a legitimate being only after a series of suppressions and erasures have reframed the self in terms of new homogenous loyalty, where a part of Sobti's cultural upbringing must be denied and devalued to fashion a normative ideal citizen subject.

It is only in this memory novel, years after the traumatic experience of being uprooted and etching new cartographies of belonging can Sobti practice what may be called a critical nostalgic mode of remembering. Memory and nostalgia intermingle in her narrative to produce a progressive vision of a shared existence that contrasts sharply with a bleak and shattered post-partition present" (Prakash 22). This radical reordering then puts in place a counter-historical past that speaks to the syncretic heritage of the sub-continent and challenges the homogenised, received communal histories of both nations. Amrita Ghosh has located how post-partition fiction performs refugee nostalgia by creating a third space, which ruptures the unities of time, space, and nationhood (Ghosh 1). Nostalgia in Sobti's text is yearning for what has ceased to exist: a sense of home that can never be a part of the reality of the self. The text narrates, through its repeated suppression of memory, how this nostalgia has become a taboo subject. Svetlana Boym in her groundbreaking work on nostalgia traces a typology of restorative and reflective nostalgia: While "restorative nostalgia attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home, reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity." (Boym *Future of Nostalgia* xiii) Nostalgia in Sobti's work thus is not mere reminiscing but provides for a recuperative agency that points towards alternative possible futures, rather than simply yearning for an impossible past. Boym asserts the need to "explore missed historical opportunities and highlight alternative spaces of freedom" (Boym *Another Freedom* 1), where freedom is not only defined by what is but by what ifs. Sobti's text performs this speculative task, creatively reimagining possibilities that represent alternative ways of not being trapped within narrow limitations imposed by

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spurious patriotism. Instead of fixity of the sense of self, Sobti narrates a fluid dynamic selfhood that refuses to be disciplined and controlled, defying regimentation through imaginatively re-creating a plural self in her memoir. As the title suggests, the work attempts to bring together the two locations separated in geopolitical space and the past in a temporal schema. The narrative of Sobti's text performs a collective utopia through its nostalgic mode, even as it registers the impossibility of such utopias in the fractured present.

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